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The National Security Council and the Making of American Middle East Policy

by Les Janka

A common response of human nature is to react to bad news by blaming the messenger. Similarly, critics of particular foreign policies sometimes point to the decision-making process as a root cause of policy failures or defeats of preferred options. Given the continuing high levels of concern being expressed about the Reagan Administration's policies in the Middle East, even in the pages of this journal, an examination of the structure and processes of decision making in the present Administration appears timely.

After all, in his State of the Union address on January 25th, President Reagan told the nation, "We are making progress in Lebanon" and "The United States is safer, stronger, and more secure in 1984 than before." A curious listener might wonder just how the Administration developed policies that produced such surprising and welcome results.

Under the American Constitution, the question of who makes foreign policy decisions, if not perfectly clear, is relatively simple: the President. Congress may occasionally temper, restrain, distort, or derail a President's preferences, but the ultimate focus of authority is presidential and the implementation of policy is clearly lodged in the Executive Branch. The question of how a President shapes his administration's national security priorities and enforces the implementation of those policies is somewhat more difficult to answer.

The actual structure and functioning of any administration's policy-making structure is going to reflect to a large degree the managerial style of the incumbent President. The basic structural elements of Executive Branch foreign policy management have been in place since the National Security Council was created in 1947. The current pattern of interdepartmental coordination, reflecting the inherent rivalries and complexities of divided national security authority and responsibility, dates to the early Nixon/Kissinger years. Nevertheless, the Reagan Administration has taken almost three years to develop a coherent and relatively smooth-running policy formulation mechanism.

Nineteen eighty-one was virtually a year lost in the development of a coherent Executive Branch approach to national security issues. While Alexander Haig attempted to "in-vicar-ate" his State Department's role, Richard Allen failed to build a National Security Council staff capable of extending firm presidential control over the rivalry-ridden foreign affairs corral. The appointment

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of George Shultz helped calm the process, but William Clark and Robert McFarlane, while moving to strengthen the staff of the National Security Council, gave little attention to constructing and extending a more coherent pattern of decision-making throughout the national security bureaucracy.

To a large degree, both Allen and Clark continued the Kissinger/Brzezinski pattern, whereby the incumbent Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs preferred to concentrate on being a key foreign policy advisor rather than being the manager of a much broader national security process incorporating defense, intelligence, and international economic policies into a coherent whole.

With regard to the Middle East, the Reagan Administration initially gave the region a low priority and, with the exception of the struggle with Congress over the sale of AWACS to Saudi Arabia, contented itself with rhetorical references to the sanctity of the Camp David process and the need for a "strategic consensus" against perceived growing Soviet adventurism in the region. Only after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 and the departure of Haig, did the Administration, under Shultz's leadership, produce the comprehensive Middle East peace initiative promulgated in President Reagan's speech on September 1, 1982.

Under the "ideal" model for national security policy formulation in the Reagan Administration, as that model had evolved by the end of 1983, an extensive structure of interagency working groups and review committees develops Executive Branch policies and formulates options for discussion by the full National Security Council, and ultimate decision

by the President.

The "workhorses" of this model system, are a number of regional and functional interdepartmental groups (IGs) chaired by departmental officers at the Assistant Secretary level. After the IGs have collected and analyzed the available data relevant to a policy problem and developed a full range of responses, their work is reviewed by one of four Senior Interdepartmental Groups (SIGs), generally chaired at the Deputy Secretary or Under Secretary level, but not infrequently by a Secretary or Agency Chief. Currently, there are four functioning SIGs: Foreign Policy, Defense Policy, Intelligence Policy, and International Economic Policy. A fifth specialized SIG reviews arms control policies and negotiating strategies. Not all of the IGs and SIGs meet with equal regularity, nor are they equally well led or influential in the policy-making constellation.

In addition to these regular interdepartmental committees, there is also an NSC "Special Situation Group," chaired by the Vice President, which exists primarily to deal with crisis management situations. Under this crisis rubric, there also exists at the sub-cabinet level a "Crisis Pre-Planning Group." Usually chaired by a senior NSC Deputy, this group is convened to consider the first warnings and indications of an impending crisis and to thereby energize the entire NSC system in preparation for higher-level meetings if events require.

After the SIGs have completed their senior-level reviews (often lower-order policy issues and interagency disputes are resolved at the SIG level), national security policy options and recommendations are referred to the full National Security Council for discussion and resolution in front of the President, who chairs the Council. In addition to the usual statutory members and advisors of the NSC and the appropriate sub-cabinet and staff officials, other regular attendees of NSC meetings have included such members of the top White House Staff as James Baker, Edwin Meese, and Michael Deaver. UN Permanent Representative Jeanne Kirkpatrick may sometimes attend.

Under this "ideal" model NSC system, the policy planning process begins with a presidential National Security Study Directive (NSSD), drafted by the NSC staff, directing the appropriate SIG/IG to answer certain questions and develop a full set of agency recommendations.

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dations on a specified major policy problem. Within the current NSC staff, it is generally held that 10 meetings of an IG will underlie each meeting of an SIG, and five SIG meetings will precede one meeting of the full NSC. The NSC staff is expected to monitor and keep this process on track without dominating its substance and to prepare objectively the final options paper for NSC and presidential review. After the President has heard the views of his top advisors, his decision and instructions for implementing it are formalized in a National Security Decision Directive (NSDD), of which about 150 have been signed to date by President Reagan.

One distinctive feature of the NSC process under Reagan has been the relative frequency and regularity of formal NSC meetings. Whereas other recent Presidents have called NSC meetings on a sporadic and *ad hoc* basis as issues and events required, the Reagan White House generally tries to hold an NSC meeting each week. During a crisis period, or when an issue is particularly sensitive, a more restricted group known as the National Security Planning Group (NSPG) is convened. This smaller group consists essentially of NSC principals only, chaired by the President, and it may meet much more frequently during critical periods than the formal NSC.

This penchant for frequent meetings reflects President Reagan's management style as well as his genuine commitment to cabinet-style government. He prefers to hear personally the discussions (and disputes) of his top advisors and he values the consensus-building process of fully debating issues and differences until agreement is reached.

Middle East Policy

If the above description is the "ideal" model of the Reagan Administration's NSC system, how does this structure work in reality, particularly with regard to the development of policies and strategies for the multiple challenges of the Middle East? According to several central participants and close observers, policy making on the Middle East does not follow the "ideal" model very closely. Nevertheless, a large majority of the formal NSC meetings, perhaps as many as 40-45, have dealt with Middle East issues.

This concentration of decision making at the higher reaches of the Administration reflects more than just the degree to which the top levels of the Reagan team have been consumed by serious Middle East problems since June of 1982. It also reflects a preference for a style of diplomacy utilizing presidential special en-

voys (Ambassadors Habib, Draper, Fairbanks, McFarlane, et al) and the fact that, regarding the Middle East (and its domestic political ramifications), the policy process has never functioned well from the bottom up.

Since October of 1983, it has also reflected the placement of one former special Middle East negotiator, Robert McFarlane, in the top job at the NSC. During his Middle East shuttles, State Department officials often complained that McFarlane (who retained his hat as Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs) was communicating directly with the President behind Shultz's back. Now that he is running the NSC system, McFarlane, who stated when appointed that he intended to be "not an actor but an arbitrator," appears to deal otherwise with Middle East issues, using his own NSC staffers with little reliance on the rest of the bureaucracy. For example, the formal Study Directive (NSSD) tasking mechanism has rarely been utilized. This situation is even further complicated by the appearance of Donald Rumsfeld, a former Secretary of Defense, who is used to dealing directly at the top, although Rumsfeld does get high marks for his efforts to touch base frequently with all the top players.

The result of this "top-heavy" decision structure appears to have produced a feeling at the middle levels of State and Defense that, on Middle East issues, the NSC is not a neutral actor and that the SIG/IG mechanism for Middle East issues has grown flabby and is an ineffective channel for new ideas. Viewed from the White House level, there is a recognition that McFarlane may be prone to pursue his own policy preferences, but there is also a long-standing feeling that the State Department bureaucracy is too intellectually constipated and divided to produce timely and creative policy recommendations.

This situation means that, while the NSC staff is in no way "making policy," McFarlane's Middle East team plays a much stronger role in influencing policy outcomes and their implementation than other regional elements of the NSC staff do in their jurisdictions. Geoffrey Kemp is the NSC's principal Middle East peace policy strategist, but he reportedly refrains from playing an activist role in the bureaucratic process. Kemp's assistant, Howard Teicher, a former Pentagon analyst and State Department protégé of McFarlane, functions in the critical role of staff support to Rumsfeld. Donald Fortier, Senior Director for Policy Development, and his assistant, Navy Commander Phillip Dur, manage most of the political-military issues relating to Leba-

non and the Persian Gulf.

Overall, one is led to conclude that while all principal actors (and their staffs) have adequate opportunity for involvement and input, the actual impact of sub-cabinet officials on Middle East policy is much more limited than in other areas of Reagan Administration foreign policy making.

There is one important aspect of Middle East policy making that usually operates at levels lower than the top of the NSC system. Arms sales policy and security assistance budget questions appear to be resolved in a specialized IG process run by the State Department's Politico-Military Bureau with frequent disputes with the Near East Bureau and little high-level NSC input.¹ A special Arms Sales Policy Committee, formerly headed by Deputy Secretary Kenneth Dam, is now run jointly by Undersecretaries Lawrence Eagleburger and William Schnieder, working closely with Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Affairs) Richard Armitage. Top NSC members tend to get involved only when interagency disputes cannot be resolved, or a particular sale is freighted with political difficulties.

If the above is a fair, if simplified, description of how Middle East policy making really works, the question remains, how well does it all work? Does this elaborate policy structure, used or abused, provide the President and his top advisors with the full range of information and policy choices necessary to formulate adequate responses to the many threats American interests are facing in the Middle East?

It cannot be denied that the frequent number of full NSC meetings regarding the Middle East have given the President's top advisers plentiful opportunities to present their views and differences directly to the ultimate decision maker. And despite frequent, and sometimes accurate, media reports of substantive tensions within the foreign policy community, the current structure does seem to produce a general acceptance, if not a consensus, on overall policy, and preserves the generally amiable personal relations among the President's first team of advisors.

¹Determining the amount of economic and military assistance to Israel is an exception that proves the rule that the NSC system does not work from the bottom up. In its June 1983 report, *US Assistance to the State of Israel*, the US General Accounting Office noted that "... decisions regarding FMS are made at the highest levels in the Administration. Justifying FMS for Israel is seen only as an exercise by some lower level Executive Branch officials. The assistance levels are determined by policy considerations beyond those involving only basic defense needs."

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The greatest weakness of the current system with regard to Middle East policy making is its failure to fully engage and exploit the regional expertise at the intermediate levels of the bureaucracies at State and Defense. Despite a widely held feeling that McFarlane and his NSC Middle East team are hardly neutral managers of the NSC system, particularly with regard to the implementation of policy, it seems clear that the current structure of the system potentially provides an ideal opportunity for the Near East Bureau at State to make a major contribution, but it does not take full advantage of this opening.

Instead, the State Department officials that have the most influence on Shultz's Middle East thinking are not the Middle East experts, but Under Secretary Eagleburger and Peter Rodman of the Policy Planning Council, both renowned in Washington for their pro-Israeli views. It is thus possible to conclude that, today, virtually none of the key actors in formulating American Middle East policy have extensive experience in or knowledge of the Middle

East.

Other weaknesses of the current system include, importantly, the poor quality of intelligence input. This is not to say that the intelligence community does not play an active role in the process, but rather to report the judgment of several key players that the *product* of the intelligence community cannot be graded higher than a solid "B."

This is explained as due to the perennial neglect of human intelligence collection in favor of an overreliance on technical means. Another weakness is the President's tolerance for the influence of "wild-card" players outside the NSC structure. Frequently mentioned in this context is Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick, who, lacking institutional support or regular involvement in the NSC system, nevertheless has direct access to the President's thinking about the Middle East.

A devastating weakness of the entire process is the lack of systematic inputs and direction on legislative affairs throughout the system. The endemic weakness of the departmental legislative affairs offices means that Congressional aspects of policy discussions are not

dealt with except in the full NSC, where James Baker becomes involved only after a problem may be too big to avert an Executive-Legislative brawl.

In conclusion, we are left with a recognition that even though the current policy formulation process does not always produce policies that everyone supports, or often enough just policies that have a chance of working, this failure is not really a function of form and process.

The current system clearly provides for the full exposure to the President of the views and differences of his top advisors. That they do not bring him the fullest or highest quality of regional expertise is more a function of the ideological leanings and political courage of the top incumbents than of the decision-making structure. These advisors are, after all, the people the President chose to advise him.

Ultimately, the propensity of the Reagan Administration to worry more about the possible growth of Soviet influence in the Middle East than about the real decline of American influence in that area is due to the intellectual, not organizational, make-up of the Executive Branch.

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